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# Why I Stopped Being Chinese

Xu Xi

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## *Why I Stopped Being Chinese*

**T**he **HOW** is impossible. Chinese blood and hair, clichéd almond eyes. You do not escape physiognomy or the interlocked outer and inner miens. The **Why** is not about the **How**, and this is not some how-to manual of shame. Instead, let's zero in on the **Who**, **What**, and **Where**, in this rhetoric of **How** and **Why**.

The **WHO** should be brief. Chinese-Indonesian, former Indonesian citizen, native of Hong Kong, domiciled in the world. The world is impossible. You cannot really live in three places at once, even though you have pretended you do so via the cyber-landscape. Instead, let us converse with the dead in the tried-and-true Chinese tradition of ancestor worship, and the starting point is paternal Grandpop, tyrant and philanderer, that cultured world-wanderer on someone else's dime, or so Mum accused.

The problem. Grandpop was ancient, and both your parents were already a tad too old to be having you and the younger ones. Thirty-three to be having me, the first child in 1954, was likely painful for Mum. Dad was twenty-nine. The problem is that this parental *who* should have happened in the early twenty-first century (or at least the late twentieth), which would have made us, the children, TCKs. That's the easier *who*: being "third culture kids." They need reflect far, far less on which skin color, which languages, which countries demand or deserve allegiance. A passport is a mere carrying card for border crossings and the idea is to fit in everywhere and nowhere as awesomely as possible. Alas, born too un-awesomely soon.

I am being peevish. I am tipping over to the almost-elderly side of middle age, and still wondering *why Chinese?*

Another problem. Grandpop was very Chinese, even though the five children from the former mistress and younger second wife (half his age, my mother's age) speak nary a word. My father did, though, as do his real-not-half brothers, but his Mandarin was the wrong Chinese for my moment of birth. When you, Dad, are surrounded by Southern babblers of Cantonese in 1949, the year of China's rebirth under Mao, because you've fled Shanghai for Hong Kong (as he did that year), you no longer know what kind of Chinese you are. It was likely easier back in Chinese school in Tegal, a village in Central Java, where Grandpop was

Honorable Father to whom you bowed, Confucian style, your forehead knocking repeatedly against the ground. When all you had to do was grovel. But then you grew up, left home, learned English because it was the thing to do, and before you knew it the world turned and there you were, in British colonial Hong Kong and married, and the next thing you know, the little ones are babbling in English and, *dammit, man I say*, in Cantonese, that coarse, guttural, sewer cycle of atonality, offending your musical ear. Poor Dad. Here was this violinist-tenor schooled in Italian opera and European classical music with a smattering of international pop. His ear (unlike that of the Confucian gentleman at age sixty) was not “attuned” to the voices of the Chinese world around him—六十耳（不）順—disturbing the universe of the sage.

I like Cantonese, still do, and sound more fluent than I really am, but at sixty, this really shouldn’t be a problem anymore, should it?

The maternal problem: Mum was too pure of blood. Five generations in Central Java did not eradicate the racism, the superior attitude of fair-skinned Chinese vs. dark-skinned Indonesian natives. This is the history of the world, and my mother’s family was no different, even while they inbred into madness, lost the language, and abandoned the culture in favor of the comfort of the sarong and the rich, heady, tropical spices and fruits of the natives that was the far, far better thing to do.

Which is why I grew up in Cantonese Hong Kong without Cantonese food or the language at home. I can however eat spicy, spicy, *laat, laat*, so *laat*, this déjà-taste of my mother’s tongue, although her language was lost to the tongue of our British colonial masters.

The *Who* has been less brief than desired.

The **WHAT** is a Nation, a four-thousand-plus-year History with too many emperors to recall, a Culture and Language that shape-shift as you traverse the world, infused as these now are with the rest of humanity. *There are Chinese everywhere*, say my country folk with pride.

Yet is that pride or sorrow? The *wah kiu* or *hua qiao* scattered around the globe have pined for their home village since the Tang Dynasty when Li Po penned his homesickness ode (床前明月光—*from my bedside moon is bright*, etc.). Too many men without women landed on foreign shores, as my paternal ancestors did. In our genealogical chart, the earliest *arrivistes* married unnamed “Indonesian women.” It was not till three generations later that named Chinese wives appear in our doctored family history. Who were these anonymous women, those natives who said yes to my horny ancestors? Were they shunned by their own communities, seen as whores? Were they whores? After all, what respectable Javanese

girl would fuck these yellow-skinned barbarians who landed on their shores? To my great-to-the-power-of-seven Indonesian Mama, thanks for my skin that does not burn, even under a tropical sun.

And yet. Is that gratitude pride or merely foolishness, pretentiousness, an inferiority complex, racism, fear? All of this and more, no doubt, in the human consciousness of sea change after the migration tsunami subsides.

The Nation, though, is more complicated. The Chinese language loves this term “complicated”: 複雜—*fuk jaahp* (Cantonese) or *fu za* (Mandarin). Its etymology suggests a doubling, repetitive, overlapping effect, a complexity, combined with an assortment that is both numerous and petty. Life as a Chinese in the world is *fuk jaahp*, which seems to be the default position for anything too difficult to contemplate, at least in the Chinese Hong Kong (or, as some still say, Hong Kong Chinese) society in which I find myself located more often than not.

For one thing, there is corruption. While Hong Kong has its ICAC, the Independent Commission Against Corruption, China simply executes the corrupt official or businessman who is too blatant, or if the people protest vociferously enough (especially if death, destruction, and other evidence of callous indifference to humanity is involved) so that even the central government can no longer ignore it. But you can’t execute all the corrupt people all of the time. This is simply no way to run a country.

For another, there is the possibility of being incarcerated for saying the wrong thing. Now I know there are those who say that political dissidents deserve what they get in a one-party, unabashedly authoritarian state, but doesn’t that make you wonder why you should call yourself “Chinese” by nationality? There are two ways a Hong Kong-born citizen like myself can enter the Motherland: on a “return to China-home certificate” (回鄉證), which is relatively inexpensive and which my Hong Kong Chinese friends with foreign passports have obtained, or on a visa with my U.S. passport, which is costly. The latter does, however, offer consular protection, while the former ensures that if you cross the wrong official or say the wrong thing that offends the authorities, you might end up in jail.

I like my freedoms, still do, and prefer to pay for these if I must, even though China rises and rises, inviting her people back to her bosom, tempting us with the one-armed *ka-ching!* of her economic miracle, promising a better, brighter future under a sun that, these days, is no longer red, just invisible thanks to pollution.

But were you ever Chinese enough?

Once, back in the '80s, not long after I'd recently moved to New York, I encountered an ethnic Chinese woman from Taiwan in one of those self-improvement business courses for advancing your career. She had lived in the U.S. for over twenty years, while I was not yet even a citizen, having entered the country on a student's visa for grad school and married an American, which was reason to remain in the country. She spoke better Chinese than me while I spoke better English, by then with an American, not British, accent. I had lived and worked in Hong Kong as an adult for around seven years and was still fairly current on contemporary Hong Kong life. Her Taiwan was enshrined in a Kuomintang past, and she and her family were rooted in New Jersey. Yet all it took was hearing me speak for her to say that I was not a "real Chinese," while, presumably, she was, since she lived "more Chinese" in America than I. I hesitated to point out Taiwan's "un-China" political status, even in America's eyes.

She was unusually shrill, scornful of my easy integration into American society. Yet my life has been in many ways "more Chinese" than hers, insofar as *where* my life has been, significantly around a Chinese world in Hong Kong and Asia, while hers has been American. She probably only visits the ancestral home on self-improvement vacations. Yet her attitude was not uncommon. All my life I've encountered ethnic Chinese who deny me the right to be Chinese, because of my language, demeanor, blood. Even the Hong Kong government does not fully recognize me as Chinese because I do not have a parent born on Chinese soil (legally in my birth city, I am and always have been classified as "foreign," albeit with a permanent right of abode). It does not matter that I often encounter "real Chinese" who look at me blankly when I say, *you know, Chinese literature*, *Journey to the West or Dreams of Red Chambers or Mo Yan, you know, the second Chinese guy to win the Nobel for literature?* Or even when I order a Chiu Chow meal for Cantonese friends, who gaze at me, mystified, and ask, *how do you know this*, as if another region close to their own should be so entirely foreign.

The *what* is 複雜 beyond words. To be American you just have to pledge allegiance and pay taxes on worldwide income.

The **WHERE** is the red dust of the Great Chinese Novel, *Journey to the West*, in which *Dreams of Red Chambers* is embedded. Gao Xingjian, the first Chinese writer to win the Nobel for literature, is not Chinese enough for China, and neither is Ha Jin, because he writes in English. As the mongrel writer I am, should I take solace in that? Yet do we not write into that red dust, that mystery, that common Chinese uncertainty if Chinese

blood courses through our veins? Did I not study Mandarin as an MFA fiction student in search of roots or authenticity, for something beyond Aristotle's dictum, thus almost losing my fellowship for my digressive trespass? Was not my most important writing of self that Chinese language "偶記"—an "occasional journal" titled 我是不是中國人?—essay-ing on whether I was or was not a Chinese person? *The study of Chinese does not meet the MFA requirements for a fiction writer in America*, or so I was more or less told. Admittedly, they had a point. After all, I'd already met my language requirement with French. Oh, dear Muse of American-English fiction, *voulez-vous coucher avec moi, ce soir?*

Aristotle's dictum: *dictum de omni et nullo*—the dictum of "all or none." Once again, my very existence proves him wrong. Such "reversals of fortune"—even for the man who first articulated that dramatic *idée*—should have a universal appeal, *n'est-ce pas?*

Where is the content and context for literary expression in a globalized, cosmopolitan world. Are you a traitor or patriot to write in that *lingua franca* English for an international reading public about the lives of the contemporary Chinese? And who or what do you betray and to whom or what should you be loyal? Since when was being a writer about being or not being "Chinese," whatever that is? Doesn't literature succeed and endure because it's "universal"? Or is that some Western myth of artistic expression that vanishes into Anglo-American banana-white dust?

So finally we arrive at the **WHY**, which suddenly seems immensely simple. Here is the moment of surrender: I must stop being Chinese.

As you can see for yourself, it is just too complicated.